

COMMENTARY ON ALFRED METRAUX'S FINAL ARTICLE,  
"DOES LIFE END AT SIXTY?"<sup>1</sup>

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Shortly before he took his own life on Good Friday, 1963, Alfred Metraux wrote a brief article for the *Unesco Courier*, "Does Life End at Sixty."<sup>2</sup> His final challenge to his many readers was how we as citizens of modern industrial societies can cope with the many years of enforced retirement that improved health and modern medicine have brought us. "How can we reconcile the very understandable impatience of new generations "with the energy and leisure time" of older generations who still have much to offer society, but whose potential contributions are increasingly ignored by the young. Metraux asks, "How can we find occupations for these people whose psychological age does not correspond to their real age?"

Metraux introduces us to a variety of primitive cultures that generally treat their elders with honor, love and respect. Elders in every society Metraux visited during his long career as an ethnologist provide advice, careful instruction, and considerable leadership when necessary. The elders are the tribes' "living archives" whose duty is to transmit their group's historical myths and legends to its younger generations." The elders also have contacts with powerful ancestral spirits that they will soon join.

Metraux thus indicates that at least some primitive societies have fully prescribed ways to honor, respect and fully utilize the aged. This factor gives them a far more satisfying way of life than their more "advanced" compatriots in the "modern world."

Metraux sees family as both the salvation and source of satisfaction for pre-modern societies—and realizes an especially important relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren. "Their relations are closer than those between the children and their parents. Grandparents are protectors, friends and also playmates. They often talk to each other as if they belonged to the same generation and they do not hesitate to jest and play jokes on each other. And that is why the elders prefer to confide their secrets to their grandchildren rather than to their sons and daughters."

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans, November, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Metraux, "Does Life End at Sixty," in *The Unesco Courier* (Vol. 16.4), April, 1963, pp. 20-23. All quotes are from this article.

Metraux continues: “When we look once more at our own society after this brief glimpse of the way of life of the aged in primitive societies, we see more clearly what our technological progress has cost us. We certainly live longer than “savages,” but we have paid a high price for this privilege. To be respected, to feel one’s self a useful and active member of society, to enjoy the friendship of one’s grandchildren....are not these advantages worth far more than the comfort offered by our communal homes for the aged or our “towns for old people.””

The real tragedy of Metraux’s life is that he had already killed himself before UNESCO had published this article. He now has four beautiful grown grandchildren who will never hear about princely Incas or the statues of Easter Island. Metraux never saw his own two sons develop socially useful and meaningful careers. His retirement lasted all of 102 days, but at least he did not have to enter the nursing home due to an illness that has claimed his second wife, my mother, Rhoda Metraux.

Metraux’s work, however, touches us even today. His phenomenal gifts as a scholar, writer, historian, photographer and active human rights activist contributed to the betterment of human kind. Metraux was one of a small group of individual leaders who successfully guided both the United Nations and UNESCO during the critical early stages of growth. His scholarship on South American Indians brought these people to the world stage for the first time as respected citizens of the world. Metraux as a teacher trained a whole generation of younger ethnographers.

Today we honor Metraux the scholar and human rights champion. One wonders what he would do now at UNESCO to challenge old practices. Metraux played a major role in the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and wrote reports on the evils of apartheid and caste. Today he might champion the cause of Aung Sang Syu Kyi against the evils of Burma’s military regime. His life and work continue with us today.